DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 271 039 HE 019 400

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TITLE Leave of Absence Policies in Business and Education. Administrative Report.
INSTITUTION San Mateo Office of Education, Redwood City, CA.
PUB DATE Jun 85
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Business; Elementary Secondary Education; *Employment Practices; Higher Education; *Leaves of Absence; *Personnel Policy

ABSTRACT

Leave of absence policies in business and education and the rationale for offering these policies are examined. Most businesses and education agencies allow extended personal leaves of absence, which are usually unpaid. Most companies prefer to use general policy statements and to consider each request on an individual basis. According to a survey of 253 personnel executives, purposes for which leaves are granted by a sample of school districts include: military service, paid sabbaticals and other professional study, maternity, exchange teaching abroad and in the United States, service in professional organizations and government, research or travel other than sabbatical, and holding political office. In deciding whether to grant leave, companies weigh the needs of the requestor against the company's needs. In some companies, the employee must show compelling need; in others, it seems that if the company can get along without the employee then the leave should be granted. When time limits are set on the leave, it is most often for a maximum of one year. In both business and education, the rationale for personal leave policies is that it benefits both the employee and the employer. When the employer demonstrates willingness to treat employees well, they respond with increased productivity and loyalty. (SW)

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ED271039

Administrative Report

LEAVE OF ABSENCE POLICIES IN BUSINESS AND EDUCATION

by

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June 1985

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LEAVE OF ABSENCE POLICIES IN BUSINESS AND EDUCATION

A wide variety of leaves are covered in leave of absence policies in business and education. The types of leaves include military, maternity, educational, illness, disability, personal, funeral, and so on. Leave of absence policies will be analyzed for business and education in terms of what the policies are and the rationale for offering those policies.

Business

Personal leaves of absence can be either paid or unpaid. Although paid leaves have been a long-time benefit in education, especially at the college level, and although it is a growing trend in business, most businesses still do not offer them. A recent report in U.S. News and World report stated that one out of every ten major companies had some form of paid leave (English, 1985). Companies that offer paid leaves tend to be large corporations or those involved in technology industries (large companies can more easily afford such programs and technology companies need to attract high quality employees). Among the companies which offer paid leaves are IBM, Xerox, Control Data, McDonald's, Wells Fargo, and Rolm (English, 1985; March, 1978).

Despite the relatively few companies which offer paid leaves of absence, most businesses allow some type of unpaid leave. The Bureau of National Affairs surveyed 253 personnel executives representing manufacturing companies, nonmanufacturing companies, and nonbusiness establishments and

analyzed the results for three categories of employees: plant/service, office/clerical, and management employees. The BNA found that the majority of companies granted unpaid leaves in each category, with as many as 97% of the firms providing unpaid leaves for plant/service employees. The study also found that nonbusiness establishments were more likely to provide unpaid leaves for their office/clerical employees than were either of the other two categories of companies (Bureau of National Affairs, 1983). (The full study report is available from the Bureau of National Affairs--see References for ordering information.)

The types of leave allowed varies with the company. IBM, Xerox, and Control Data offer fully-paid social service leave in which employees are placed in local social agencies for periods ranging from one month to one year. The companies feel that they are giving something back to the communities which have helped to make them successful as well as benefiting from the experience their employees gain by working in these agencies. Any employee in good standing who has two to three years tenure is eligible for participation in the social service programs (Much, 1978). Other companies offer paid leaves to employees based on their length of employment. At McDonald's, employees are given an eight-week leave of absence at full pay for every ten years of full-time service. Rolm Corporation grants 12 weeks off with full pay or six weeks at double pay for six years of employment. In both these companies, employees are free to do what they want while on leave. The companies believe that it is beneficial to allow employees time away from the pressures of work to reflect on their careers. They feel that their employees, and therefore the company, will benefit from the time off. According to a McDonald's executive, "It's not so much a reward for past

performance as it is an investment in the future." (English, 1985). Another type of leave is found at Tennant Company. Tennant offers employees near retirement from one to three months unpaid leave each year to help the employees ease into retirement. Some analysts believe that this type of leave will become more and more popular as businesses look for ways in which to phase out the older workforce (Much, 1978). Most firms, however, do not have a formal policy on personal leaves of absence. Instead, they handle requests for leaves on a case-by-case basis. Such leaves are generally allowed for education, personal emergencies, and exchange programs (Much, 1978).

The rationale for personal leave programs in business tends to be based on employee improvement rather than strictly on profit. Companies provide leaves in order to attract and keep workers, deal with stress and burnout, broaden professional skills, and provide an opportunity for personal growth. In the words of a vice president at Wells Fargo, such leave policies let "employees know that the company appreciates them." (English, 1985).

Despite the availability of these leaves, many companies report that there is no great demand for them--even for the paid leaves. Employees apparently fear that they will lose their place in the organization or be labelled as being more interested in their personal life than in their company (Much, 1978). The reentry process is also considered to be a problem. When Xerox evaluated their program, they found that three-fourths of the participants had difficulties during the reentry process. Problems included lack of suitable job assignments, pressure from management to leave, and lack of interest by the participants in old jobs. The major problems, the study concluded, were related to lack of communication between

leavetakers and their immediate managers (Much, 1978).

Education

Leaves of absence in education agencies are also common. Paid sabbaticals, especially for college faculty, have been around for a long time. Most school boards have a policy or contract with teachers granting unpaid educational leave and maternity leave (Carlin, 1982). Other allowable reasons for leaves vary from district to district. A survey reported in the Educational Research Service Circular found that districts granted leaves for the following purposes (in descending order of frequency):

-military service

-professional study (other than sabbatical)

-maternity

-exchange teaching abroad

-restoration of health (other than sabbatical or sick leave)

-paid sabbatical

-service in professional organizations

-government service

-Department of Defense schools

-travel (other than sabbatical)

-research (other than sabbatical)

-exchange teaching in U.S.

-political office

-work experience

All but the last two categories were allowed in more than half of the districts (American Association of School Administrators and National Education Association, 1966).

The Association of Research Libraries compiled policy statements from its member libraries on fringe benefits for librarians. Many of these policies included personal leaves of absence; however, they did not specify the allowable reasons for leaves. Representative policy statements were that unpaid leaves can be given for: "compelling reasons" (Northwestern University); "unusual circumstances" (Cornell University); and "personal or family reasons" (Princeton University). One school, Boston University, listed the following factors to be considered when judging a request for leave: (1) Does the employee deserve this privilege? (2) Will the leave benefit or promote the university libraries? (3) How will operations be affected? and (4) Will the needs of the library be met without incurring additional cost? (Association of Research Libraries, 1979).

The policy statement from Boston University is unique in specifying the considerations involved in granting a leave request. Most policies, in education and in business, simply state that such leaves are allowed without defining the reasons beyond a general statement such as "personal." The purposes for leaves listed in the Educational Research Service Circular were responses to a survey questionnaire--it is likely that most of the respondents did not actually have these purposes included in their written policy.

The rationale for personal leave policies in education, like business, is employee-centered. The philosophy statement of the Roseville (MN) Area Public Schools asserts that, "the provision of leaves for teachers helps to attract and retain faculty who will continue to grow professionally, maintain their physical health, and have a feeling of security." (National School Boards Association, 1973). A writer in the American School Board Journal,

arguing for a liberal leave policy, says that such policies benefit the teacher whose personal needs are satisfied; the replacement teacher who gains a year of experience and perhaps a job if the teacher does not return; the students who are taught by an eager new teacher rather than a burned-out teacher; and the budget because the replacement usually earns substantially less than the leave-taker (Carlin, 1982). These benefits could be generalized to any type of work situation where a veteran employee has burned out and new employees are available.

Summary

Most businesses and education agencies allow extended personal leaves of absence; these leaves are usually unpaid. Most companies do not spell out the purposes for which such leaves are allowed. They prefer, instead, to use general policy statements and to consider each request on an individual basis. All employees in good standing tend to be eligible for the leave programs. When time limits are put on the leave, it is most often for a maximum of one year. In deciding whether to grant a leave, companies weigh the needs of the requestor against the needs of the company. No clear answer can be given to the question of whether the burden to prove need is on the employee or the employer. In some companies, the employee must show compelling need; in others, it seems that if the company can get along without the employee then the leave should be granted. In both business and education, the rationale for personal leave policies is in its benefits for the employee--benefits which transfer into benefits for the company. When the employer demonstrates a willingness to treat its employees well, they respond with increased productivity and loyalty.

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